The traditional urban square – a vital organ in the city or a "thing" of the past?

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1. From the definition to the meaning of square

In the strictest sense, a "square" is the result of a grouping of houses around a free space, whose meaning, implicit in the definition itself, stands out as its defining feature – it is a closed space[1]. Naturally, the definition of urban square raises discussion, given the divergent opinions on the role squares should play (or not) in the urban context today. However, from a more current definition of urban square – any space within the city, in which its defining elements are clearly visible from within and where the feeling of "being" is more acutely emphasised than in any other area – a number of features and essential conditions arise, that need to be analysed[2]:

a) Based on the definition put forward and the fact that the elements surrounding the square should be clearly visible, we can state that it is not the edified elements which delimit the square, but rather, that it is the square which bestows them a tangential sense of boundary and conformation;
b) Since the sense of "being" is characteristic, there has to be a certain level, even if minimal, of activity;
c) Its nature allows for maximum control over the space – easy external accessibility is associated with a minimum external surface to be controlled – entries;
d) Dues to its strong vocation for the symbolic, it often displays public buildings or parts of these in its contents (*agora*, *forum*, church, cloister, mosque patio; etc.);
e) The strong sense of containment or enclosure it transmits favours the development of certain potentials for animation (development of attractive activities, comfort, socialising, rest, among others).

Today, when we talk of the urban square, in its most classical or traditional conceptual sense, we tend toward a nostalgic feeling evoking memories of remarkable medieval or Renaissance squares erected by history and which, due to political or technical resolve in contemporary times, can still be seen, often peacefully relegated to an almost museological purpose on the city's tourist routes.

Even though squares or plazas are places where we may have experienced significant events in our lives, they are also points of reference in our orientation and appropriation of the environment around us. Today, more than ever, squares should be prepared to receive a diversity of functions (places for demonstrations and socio-cultural, commercial or other types of gatherings [Photograph 1], places of rest and leisure, collective or individual, casual or programmed), capable of being remembered as a part of collective, personal or intimate experiences – the feeling of being is complemented by the development of one or more activities. The urban square cannot be drained of this vital function, especially when it also plays a role in rebalancing urban metabolisms feeding on phenomena of "ghettoisation", of real-estate opportunism, the blindness of a planning process which, at the beginning of

1 The concept of square is associated with a notion of place – the interior that is experienced in contrast with a surrounding exterior.

2 VIDE: BRANDÃO ALVES, F. (2003) – "Avaliação da Qualidade do Espaço Publico Urbano. Proposta Metodológica", Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia / Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

the 21st century, is indoctrinated with the creed “what is new and different”, another city which *Hall* described as “the city of the tarnished Belle Époque”, the infocities or ghettos of misinformation of the recently inherited city[3].

Photograph 1 – Public space in new Forum, Barcelona.
Source: archive of the author.

According to *Lynch*[4], "*the plaza is intended as an activity focus, at the heart of some intensive area. Typically, it will be paved, enclosed by high-density structures, and surrounded by streets, or in contact with them. It contains features meant to attract groups of people and to facilitate meetings...*", clearly highlighting the notion of “containment” or “enclosure”, one of the most relevant features of the square (and street). Its study provides a better understanding of the role of these morphological units within the city, highlighting particularly their mysterious ability to attract people, an important initial stimulus in the square’s occupational dynamic.

The presence of the automobile in the square surely represents one of the best indicators of the nature and quality of these spaces, in which the pedestrian throughways, broad-walks, public pathways, among others, are also included. The square should comprise an open public space, contained by harmonious forms, interconnected with the other morphological urban elements (streets, other squares, broad-walks, among others), with paving throughout its main extension and where the continuous presence of private motorised vehicles could possibly be excluded (Photograph 2). More than a passage way, it should be a place in itself, whose main function is that of the interactive fulfilment of the human needs mentioned – such as taking a walk, sitting, contemplating, eating, reading, observing, talking and relaxing.

Recent literature on the analytical study, design and maintenance of the urban square is more focused on the development of universal axioms and methods to analyse forms than on exploring issues more directly related with the scale of the human dimension of public space, such as, for example, the spontaneous use of open spaces by regular citizens, or the behavioural aspects of the use of squares.

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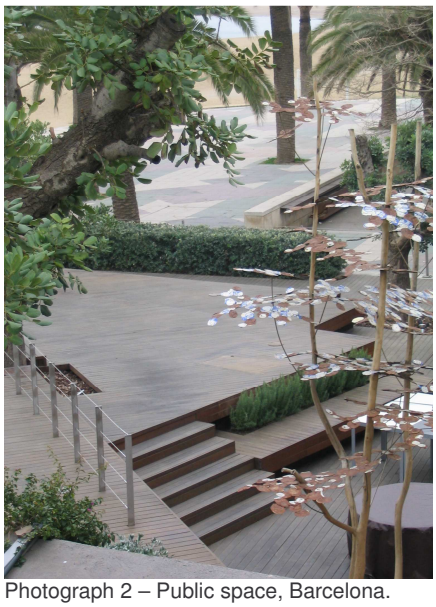
3 HALL, Peter (2002) – “Cities of Tomorrow – An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century”, third edition, Chapter 12, p.405, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

4 LYNCH, Kevin - *A Theory of good city form*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1981, p. 443.

Note for example how rare the study and implementation of “full accessibility to public space” still is in the sphere of design and political decisions. *Marcus and Francis* are very sceptical when they state "*On the whole, those books that serve as inspirational and self-defining material for designers of the urban environment are theoretical (...). Certainly these larger issues are valid and important, but it is our fear that they often are the only inspirational source, to the detriment of the population affected by the resulting designed spaces*"[5]; complementarily, other (rare) studies, particularly centred on pedestrian movements, are detailed documents whose main focus directed at the management, planning and supervision of urban areas, goes beyond the academism of design, in these cases, compensated by a number of ideas expressed in the selection of printed photographs. We are referring in particular to a number of works or articles, such as "*Streets for People*", by the OECD[6], highlighting the planning and management of urban space; "*Mennisker til fods*" (*People on foot*), by *Jan Gehl*[7], including studies by architecture students, on the behaviour of pedestrians in one of the oldest and most famous streets in Europe - *Strøget* - in *Copenhagen*, where, in the first year after it was transformed into a pedestrian throughway, the number of pedestrians rose by thirty five percent, and the number of baby strollers by four hundred percent[8]; "*Pedestrian Planning and Design*", by *John Fruin*[9], a statistical and detailed examination of the capacity for pedestrian circulation in streets, lifts, stairs, underground passageways, among others; "*Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*"[10], illustrating the multiplicity of open spaces that surround us, the daily activities and their specific demand in the environment created by man; "*Urban Space for Pedestrians*", a report by *Pushkarev* and *Zupan*[11], emphasising a sophisticated analysis of pedestrian behaviour in streets and squares; "*On Streets*", a collection edited by *Anderson*[12], on urban design and the social expression of streets, and which gathers important requirements formulated by the different authors on the design of squares and particularly on their interconnection with streets, from a joint perspective in which these and other leisure spaces are understood as essential places in the interactive use legitimately conferred on them; "*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*", by *Whyte*[13], focusing on a number of studies on squares in New



Photograph 2 – Public space, Barcelona.
Source: archive of the author.

5 MARCUS, Clare Cooper; FRANCIS, Carolyn - *People Places - Design Guidelines for Urban Open Space*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990, p. 10.

6 Apud MARCUS, Clare Cooper (*et alt.*), cit. 5 (Reference OECD, Paris, 1974).

7 Article published in the Danish journal Arkitekten, 70(2), 1968, p.p. 429-446.

8 GEHL, Jan - *Life between buildings: Using public space*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987.

9 Ap. MARCUS, Clare Cooper (*et alt.*), cit. 5. The authors mention the work of John J. Fruin - *Pedestrian Planning and Design*. New York: Metropolitan Association of Urban Designers and Environmental Planners, 1971, (original Danish publication, 1971).

10 Ap. MARCUS, Clare Cooper (*et alt.*), cit. 5.

11 Ap. MARCUS, Clare Cooper (*et alt.*), cit. 5. The work by Boris Pushkarev and Jeffrey Zupan is mentioned - *Urban Space for Pedestrians*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1975.

12 ANDERSON, Stanford, ed. - *On Streets*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1978.

13 WHYTE, William H. - *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Washington D.C.: Conservation Foundation, 1980. This work is the continuation of the study on several New York squares, in the scope of the Street Life

York, with particular emphasis on the observation of behaviour in the environment as one of its main aims; and "*Public Life in Urban Places: Architectural Characteristics Conducive to Public Life in European Cities*" and "*Livable Cities - People and Places: Social and Design Principles for the Future of the City*", both by *Crowhurst-Lennard*[14], which discuss the theory and practice of humanisation of the urban environment.

2. Does the perfect square exist? How is it built?

An intrinsic feature of the square – "containment" or "enclosure" – has led to a variety of classifications according to the forms it can take. *Zucker*[15] distinguished five architectural forms: the closed square, where the space is self-contained; the dominated square, where the open space is directed towards a single structure or a group of important buildings, and all the other surrounding structures relate with it; the nuclear square, where the space is shaped around a centre; grouped squares, where the spatial units are associated in such a way as to form larger compositions; and the amorphous square, where the space is unlimited. For *Sitte*[16], enclosure is taken as a prerequisite of the square, and he concluded that in formal terms there are only two types of square, identifiable by the nature of the dominate structure. Thus, he defined two categories: the "deep" type and the "wide" type, even though both may become apparent properties of a square when the observer stands at the extreme opposite to the largest building dominating the "*layout*". *Sitte* places greater emphasis on grouped squares than on the amorphous square or the inner space which surrounds the so traditional central element. He interpreted them not as generic forms but rather by the manner in which they are related to each other and to the urban fabric in general.

To achieve enclosure in the square necessarily implies analysing its corners. According to *Sitte*[17], whenever possible, only one street should open out at a point, while a second street should branch off the previous one further back, out of view from the square. Overlapping views outward should be avoided from any point in the square. Traditionally, the edified structures are also a strategy in obtaining the sense of enclosure. Alternatively, the corner or entry can be closed, and instead an arch, a lintel or architecture itself can be used; see the case of the Arch of Rua Augusta in Lisbon which, due to its peculiar placement directly in line with the centre of the *Praça do Comércio* (Square of Commerce), establishes a transitional and articulated sculpturesque point from the street to the square, acquiring symbolic and referential qualities within this ample urban space.

Other, no less important, qualities of squares and their surrounding buildings affect their degree of enclosure. These include the nature of the buildings' eaves line or roofline, the relation between their height and the size of the space they enclose,

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Project in the 1970s, initially funded by the Rockefeller Foundation under the direction of William H. Whyte. Later, this Project was substituted by Project for Public Spaces, under the direction of the constancy firm Fred Kent III, which centred its studies on problem streets and squares in several cities.

14 Ap. MARCUS, Clare Cooper (*et alt.*), cit. 5. Two volumes by Suzanne H. Crowhurst-Lennard and Henry L. Lennard are mentioned - *Public Life in Urban Spaces: social and architecural characteristics conducive to public life in European cities*. New York, Southampton: Gondolier Press, 1984; *Livable cities - People and Places: Social and Design Principles for the Future of the City*. New York, Shouthampton: Gondolier Press, 1987.

15 ZUCKER, Paul - *Town and Square*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, p. 151.

16 MOUGHTIN, Cliff - *Urban Design: Street and Square*. Oxford: Butterworth Architecture, 1992, p.p. 99.

17 Idem-Ibidem, p. 99.

their volumetry, the presence or absence of a unifying architectural theme, and the overall shape of the space itself.

In an internal space, the highest horizontal surface is usually the ceiling. Even though, by analogy, the heavenly dome may be the square's ceiling, it should in any case correspond to certain requirements in terms of metric composition.

For Zucker[18], the height of the sky above an enclosed square should be imagined as corresponding to three or four times the height of the tallest building in the square; this relation seems to have more bearing particularly when the eaves or roofline is more or less of equal height to its length. Not infrequently, in many medieval squares, the variations in height are usually in the same magnitude of scale, where the picturesque nature of the rooflines or tie-beams stand out; enclosure is inversely proportional to the variation in height of the square's enclosing buildings.

The relationship between the effective height of the buildings and the width of the space is always a critical issue if a harmonious space is to be (re)created. If they are too high in relation to width, a feeling of oppression may arise; if they are too low, a strong sense of vulnerability and exposure. It could be suggested that the maximum harmonious proportion of height to width should be 1:4, respectively; that is, a comfortable proportion so that an observer at the centre of the space can truly experience it from every angle. The numbers put forward are undoubtedly less modest than those of *Alberti* or *Palladio*[19]. According to the former, the acceptable variation is between a third (maximum) and a sixth (minimum) in height in relation to width. Palladio, though, narrows *Alberti's* proportions, such that the square's width varies between 7/4 $(1\frac{3}{4})$ and 5/2 $(2\frac{1}{2})$ times the height of the buildings, respectively, based on the typical width of the Roman Forum.

Based on experiments carried out in the field, we believe that the detail of a building is better perceived at a distance equal to the building's largest dimension. On the one hand, some theorisers contend that the building is best seen as a whole, i.e., as a total composition at a distance approximately equal to double its height, or at the distance given by a projection of a line on the ground at an angle of 27º drawn from the eaves line. It is believed to be the comfortable proportion so that an observer in the centre of the space can truly experience it from every angle. To take in more than one building requires a distance from the observer of three times their height or a distance which follows the previous calculations at an angle of 18º. Below this measure, the objects lose predominance in the field of vision – other objects beyond the square can thus be perceived and the sense of enclosure is lost.

Sitte stated that once the height of the main buildings was taken, the square's minimum width and maximum dimension could be declared, so as to obtain the most favourable perception, as being treble the height (a proportion of 3:1). Furthermore, the general form of the building, its purpose and detailing could not admit exceptional dimensions. Only with this metric proportion would it be possible to truly enjoy the entire physical and perspective dynamic of the space, bearing in mind the physiological limitations of human sight and the full range of sensations it provides. Despite all these principles, there are many a successful square which do not obey any of these normative restrictions. It should be noted though that *Sitte* was highly influenced by the small-scale medieval square. Some squares in these conditions

18 Ap. MOUGHTIN, Cliff, cit. 16, p. 99.

19 Idem-Ibidem, p.p. 100-101.

may have merit all of their own, whether due to their absolute dimensions, even if reduced, or their symbolic value for the community, or for other reasons. That in which they may fail, in terms of the sense of enclosure, they usually make up for in their sense of place and not least in the vibrant activities they support.

The absolute size of urban space is also related with its degree of enclosure or containment. *Sitte* found that the largest squares of old cities were on average only 57 metres × 143 metres. Many of the most charming squares, in the historical areas of our cities, are as small as 15 to 21 metres, which today is barely wide enough for a road.

The restrictions imposed by human optical geometry, at the scale of the city, indicate that the limit to distinguish human gestures is about 135 metres. Obviously, the distance at which someone can perceive other movements – military parades, fireworks, etc., is much greater than that required for human gestures. Let us admit that an observer at the centre of a space can turn around and take in every side of that space if the height-width proportion is 4:1. Even though the relation between buildings and squares can be established as definitive, the (hypothetical) metrics for visual balance which were mentioned previously may provide a guideline not only for certain interventions, but also to refine the critical perception of the spaces we observe. Thus, a square with 3-storey buildings should be about 36 to 45 metres in width, and those with 4-storey buildings should be 48 to 54 metres. If however the aim is to perceive the entire composition of the square's façades or of a group of buildings, the distance should be treble the height.

The maximum of 135 metres mentioned for size admits the existence of buildings with about seven storeys, i.e., the movement of the observer in the square provides him/her with a reading of the composition as a whole, of the buildings' proportions individually, and also of details when focusing more closely, although the sense of enclosure is attenuated. The higher the perception of the tri-dimensional modelling of the surrounding buildings, the more reduced the sense of enclosure of the public space. Containment or enclosure is lost if, for example, the space's boundaries are shaped by town blocks or isolated neighbourhoods. For example, *Rob Krier* has in many cases opted for solutions employing the open design of façades for urban space, in an attempt to find other purposes other than enclosure. Repeatedly, the ideal of enclosure is the bi-dimensional quality of the plan.

The buildings around an enclosed space should form a continuous surface and seem an architectural unit to the beholder (Photograph 3). This property can be clearly perceived in the use of colonnades and arcades as continuous forms of connecting the ground floors of different buildings, creating a gallery or covered passageway. Some theorisers contend that the ideal distance to clearly perceive a dominant building at the extreme end of a square is approximately double the building's height, measured perpendicularly to its main façade[20]. Even if these metric relations have proven fundamental in the reading of the detail of Gothic buildings, including their statues and sculpture, their importance is often best understood in the oldest religious squares of medieval times[21].

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20 The square which contains all these rules is *Piazza Navona,* in Rome, whose sides maintain a relation of 1:5 approximately.

21 Sitte revealed preferential relations between length and width but did not neglect to mention that in great squares where this relation is greater than 1:3, the space loses part of its charm. For Alberti, the ideal of the square is centred on a relation in which the length is double the width.

A remarkable Renaissance example is the *Piazza Della Santíssima Annunziata* (mid -14th century), which took on the name of the Basilica. Small, rectangular and welcoming, the square closes off on one side the large axis of the present-day *Via del Servi*, which in turn is closed off at the other end by *Brunelleschi's* great "dome". One of the features which most contributes to its charm are the three lateral galleries lining its boundaries. In general terms, its current appearance represents a concentration of urban planning as envisaged by *Brunelleschi* and his contemporaries. Between the 13th and 17th centuries, several artists were involved in the design of this part of Florence, following the imperatives of the place as highlighted by their predecessors. If the *genius locus* has become a lost art in recent times, undeniably essential in the grand construction of the city, in Florence this art was demonstrated by all those who contributed to the creation of this square.

Photograph 3 – Venceslau Square, Prague.
Source: archive of the author.

2.1. The square as a "dominated" or "enclosed" form

The first two of *Zucher's* categories – the "enclosed" square and the "dominated" square (the latter equivalent to *Sitte's* "deep" and "wide" squares, mentioned earlier) – are nothing less than variations of the same type, distinguished by a quality which they share – "enclosure" or "containment" – the purest expression of a sense of place.

According to *Zucher*[22], the dominated square is characterised by the presence of a singular structure or a group of buildings with which the open space establishes a direct relationship and with which all the other surrounding structures are also related. We have seen that, for *Sitte*, the classification of squares was restricted to only the "*deep*" and "*wide*" types; both fall within *Zucher's* "dominated" square category, in which being deep or wide usually becomes an apparent property whenever the observer is opposite the main building which dominates the entire space.

Indeed, the building dominating a deep square should have dimensions which are proportional to the space it is directed at; in the past, it was usually the façade which complied with this requirement. The medieval space in front of the building constituted an extension to the function of its main entrance – here the religious community would gather, before and after the service, an example of which is the traditional churchyard, where sermons were preached outdoors and from which great processions departed. The buildings around the church where almost always related with these functions and were, naturally, subordinate to the main structure.

22 Ap. ZUCKER, Paul cit. 15.

2.2. The square as a belvedere

A public square can be dominated by a view or not infrequently by a building or group of buildings or objects of great sculptural value. In several squares or plazas in southern Italy or in Sicily, the space is shaped by buildings which only line three of their sides. The fourth side is a belvedere which permits magnificent views of the landscape lying beyond the square. See the case of the *Praça do Comércio* in Lisbon, by Eugénio dos Santos, facing the Tagus River, which opens out into a striking view of the water's surface, making it perhaps one of the most impressive squares in the Iberian Peninsula. In the ideological fashion of the Enlightenment of the government of the Marquis de Pombal, it constitutes an "(…) admirable open stage over the Tagus"[23], which drops the curtain on the Reconstruction plan (following the 1765 earthquake that ruined most of the city) of this part of Lisbon. We can find other examples of belvedere squares or plazas, particularly in cities built on sloping waterfronts, such as the notable case of the city of Taormina in Sicily.

2.3. The square as a point of departure and arrival

As a point of departure and arrival, the square gains its greatest expression in the *Piazza del Campidoglio*, in Rome. It was during the papacy of Paul III in 1537 that Michelangelo was commissioned to project a monumental plaza on the *Campidoglio* hill; it was only concluded about a hundred years after his death. Here, thanks to the attention paid to architectural detail, the author created a unifying composition dominated by the direction defined by the main building, the *Palazzo del Senatore* and, in the opposite direction, by the views over Rome. The design was also restricted by another existing feature, the *Palazzo dei Conservatori*. Michelangelo proposed new architectural forms for both palaces in the mid-16th century.

This intervention in *Campidoglio* illustrates the communion between the first Renaissance squares, such as the *Piazza Della Santíssima Annunziata*, in Florence, and the interventions in Rome in the late Baroque period. Despite the trapezoidal geometry of the square, the design of a starburst pattern in the pavement, at the centre of which the statue of Marcus Aurelius, spreading over the oval courtyard, bestows the square an illusion of rectangularity – the well-known effect of false perspective which so profoundly marked the works of this Master, and which is brought on by the narrow alignment of the existing buildings. It is furthermore an extremely exquisite example of the "radiance effect" in urban space, which among other particularities, conditions and directs the movement of pedestrians and brings on the optical illusion. In summary, the success of the intervention is the result of an urban design which, in light of pre-existing constraints, acquired the necessary creative and evocative value without destroying its cultural legacy. On the contrary, the symbolic value of its essence was only enhanced.

Naturally, other spaces, roundabouts, some forms of broad-walks or, recalling Zucker, the "amorphous" or "nuclear" square, cannot be included in the category of public square, given their characteristics; notwithstanding the importance they may have as spatial features, their design requires considerations which differ from the types analysed above.

23 AUGUSTO FRANÇA, José - *Lisboa: urbanismo e arquitectura*. Lisboa: Instituto de Cultura e Língua Portuguesa, (1st edition from 1980), 1989, p. 46.

2.4. The square as centre

Undoubtedly on of the most important elements in urban design, the square has been one of the spaces most sought after for the location of public and commercial buildings in cities. It is at the same time an area enclosed by buildings and an area designed to exhibit buildings in all their splendour. Great compositions such as the *Piazza San Marco* in Venice, the *Piazza San Pietro* in Rome, and the group of squares in *Bath* by *John Wood* (and son), are unique in the qualities regarding spatial organisation, surrounding buildings and the plasticity of the silhouettes of their roofing; they achieve a strong emotional meaning and, as such, are comparable to any other form of art.

The activity of the square is importance for its vitality and also for is visual attractiveness (Photograph 4).

Photograph 4 – Public space in the water front area of Cape Town.
Source: archive of the author.

On the design of the Roman Forum, *Vitruvius*[24] said that these aspects should be proportional to the number of inhabitants, such that it should not be too small to be useful or that it seemed excessive.

The Renaissance theorisers followed these principles. *Alberti*[25] added that there should be several squares throughout the city, some to give place to commercial activities in times of peace, others dedicated to activities proper of youth, and others still to store provisions in times of war. He went as far as to detail several types of mercantile squares, some for gold and silver, others for spices, those for wood, and those for livestock, etc., examples of which are *Praça das Flores*, in Porto, *Praça* (or *Largo) do Toural*, in Guimarães, among many others; each should bear appropriate detailing and occupy a specific place in the city.

However, to transfer concepts or principles of urban design, which were once useful in certain places, to new realities, may represent some risk. The great virtue of the wonderful squares or plazas of Italy can in part be explained by the combination of climatic conditions which encourage life outdoors and the temperamental dispositions which characterise Italian culture. These conditions and the spontaneity of the Mediterranean populations stimulate public life which in itself bestows form on the square and street.

The mono-functionalist practices, of separating and segregating functions, associated with the architecture and urban planning of the Modern Movement, were shown to be a drawback in the art of building a city. The product of this line of thought, the massive complexes of services buildings or the large commercial precincts, have immobilised large areas of the city by closing their activities at the end of the day. The most successful urban squares, even though they possess a dominant function

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24 VITRUVIUS - *The Ten Books of Architecture*. New York: Dover Publications, 1960. Book V, Chapter 1, p. 132 (trad. por Morris H. Morgan).

25 ALBERTI, Leon Battista - *The Ten Books of Architecture* (1755 Leoni edn). New York: Dover Publications, 1986. Book IV, Chapter VIII, p. 81.

for which they are known and by which they are classified, are in most cases those that ensure a strong dynamic by the diversity of usage day and night.

The singular most important function of an element within a city is its underlying symbolism. The greatest manifestations of art are intimately linked with our deepest feelings and emotions. According to *Moughtin*[26], the great square is also linked to the world of fantasy, to the context of feeling. This primitive reaction to the world around us, including the edified environment, is intimately and undoubtedly linked to the way in which we, also, understand the human body – a type of "standard building" of urban design.

Human perception of space is centred in each of us. The development of schemes of spatial organisation based on this subjective idea of centre is extended to the notion of external centre[27] as a reference value in the environment. This idea is applicable both to the known world of each individual's daily life and to the external world, hostile and undifferentiated. As an extreme opposite to the public concept of *World Centre*, we find the house or family as put forward by *Norberg-Schulz*[28], when he argues that, if the centre of a world designates an ideal, a public objective or "paradise lost", the "house" world possess a much stronger and embracing concrete meaning which, in other words, means that each individual possesses a centre to his/her proper world. In this interval of extremes – world and house – there is a continuity of hierarchal centres which serve different communities and which are the underpinning of the disciplines of urban architecture, design and planning[29].

The centre is dominant in the city, distinguished from other places. It is only when one reaches the main square of many of the old cities that there is a feeling of having truly "arrived"; all streets natural lead to this focal point. A few European cities have maintained the importance of their centre - *Market Square* or *Slab Square,* as it is affectionately known by the inhabitants of Nottingham, is still today an opportunity for social life and the centre of many and diversified activities.

Among the non-green spaces, the urban square is unequalled as the best equipped space of reception or stay in the city, as proven by the *Piazza San Pietro* in Rome, completed by *Bernini* between 1656 and 1667, an important reference point in Rome's urban structure and, at the same time, the geographic centre of the Catholic world.

2.5. The square as gateway to the city

Any place has the dual function of entry and exit. It becomes a centre because it constitutes an objective; a place of pilgrimage, of popular demonstration, or often a place to supply the population, etc. In the same way, the function of "point of departure" or "point of arrival" is also significant (Photograph 5). This tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces is more visible in the portico, so clearly explored by

26 MOUGHTIN, Cliff, cit. 33, p.p. 88-89.

27 MOUGHTIN, Cliff, cit. 33, p. 89.

28 NORBERG-SCHULZ, Christian, cit. 37, p. 19.

29 According to Christopher Alexander, the whole should be a "centre" in itself and should also produce a system of centres around it; the centre tends towards symmetry, particularly bilateral symmetry, similar to that of the human body. The formation of the centre takes on the profile of a natural object, self-determining. This magical relationship between the centre and the complexity of the surrounding urban space comprises a unifying potential in the constitution of the whole. At that time, the plan and the project very simply work as a set of natural forces.

Alberti[30] as the objective part of the city where the beginning of a trip is defined or, on the contrary, the place where ones arrives and defines a new period of rest.

From Antiquity, the gateway has played an important role in urban and architectural design. See the example of the *Piazza del Popolo* in Rome which, for centuries, until the age of the railway, constituted the main entry to and exit from Rome for all the visitors coming from the North or those who departed in that direction.

Photograph 5 – Old centre, Guimarães.
Source: archive of the author.

We can take the gateway to mean an "invitation" or a "barrier". The transition from one domain to the other is also a critical issue in the design of the city's organisation (Photograph 6); more than in the definition of *Alberti*, and without forgetting the importance of redefining entrances and exits at certain strategic points, not only for the city but also for its most relevant spaces, to mark a transition should mean greater fluidity and less hesitation in entering or exiting any delimited area. Today, the entry function is different in the urban fabric; however, its function continues to be present in certain areas. The proposals designed should offer subtle creative solutions, in which the main concern is the organising effect of the entire composition of the space and not resort to hostile physical elements.

Photograph 6 – The sense of entrance/passage, Barcelona.

2.6. Final note

The reflection on the meaning of place, as well as the citizen's connection with it and in particular with public space, may constitute an aid in better understanding the needs and rights of citizens in public space, in terms of its human dimensions. Given the growing migratory phenomenon between countries and cities, where diversity and the confrontation between ethnic communities is increasingly greater, notwithstanding diplomatic restrictions in some cases, and the growing free circulation of people and goods in others, the meaning of place and consequently of man's connection with the environment are increasingly urgent and comprise fundamental aims in achieving and preserving the quality of the urban environment; this occurs particularly when people grow roots in a certain areas, in such a way that they become importance elements in their lives.

30 ALBERTI, Leon Battista, cit. 77, Book IV. Chapter VIII, p. 80.

It is the spaces which we inhabit and experience, and the activities that there take place, that should sustain man's connections to a place, since they are undoubtedly a primary need for any individual; people's interaction with the place, individually or as a group, encompasses both their connection with the historical, socio-cultural, economic and political dimensions, and the symbolic spectrum of their connection with the Universe, or other worlds, where their biological and psychological nature bears weight, as does intellectual development, education, and sexuality, in a complexity where time and space express themselves simultaneously and on equal terms. In this context, and recalling in this article all the architectural and urban qualities which characterise (and should continue to do so) the urban square, there are no doubts as to their potential as a vital organ in the contemporary urban metabolism, as well as the importance of their role in bolstering the city's social cohesion and, as such, the quality of life for all citizens.

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